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## ABSTRACT

With the increased number of women in the work force, sexual harassment is receiving increased attention from the federal government, journalists, researchers, and counselors. To investigate the influence of two contextual variables (status of the initiator and age of the victim) on perceptions of sexual harassment allegations, 123 college students (69 males, 54 females) read three case studies of alleged sexual harassment, manipulated for the two variables. After reading the vignettes, subjects responded to Likert-type items on belief, certainty, and responsibility, and a group of items assessing general attitudes towards sexual harassment and the importance of the age and physical attractiveness of the victim. An analysis of the results showed that greater credibility was given to the claims of a young victim when the initiator was her supervisor as compared to her co-worker. When the victim was middle aged or old no differences in perceptions of credibility existed between the two status conditions. Sex difference emerged, indicating that compared to males, females attributed less responsibility to the victim and were more likely to believe that the victim had been sexually harassed. The findings provide additional evidence of the importance of contextual variables in influencing perceptions of social-sexual encounters. (BL)

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Was she really sexually harassed? The effects of a victim's  
age and the job status of the initiator.

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the influence of two contextual variables and their interaction on college students' perceptions of sexual harassment allegations: status of the initiator and the age of the victim. Results indicated that for a young victim, greater credibility was given to her claims when the initiator was her supervisor compared to her co-worker. When the victim was middle aged or old no differences in perceptions of credibility existed between the two status conditions. Sex difference emerged with female compared to male subjects attributing less responsibility to the victim and being more likely to believe that the victim had been sexually harassed. The findings provided additional evidence of the importance of contextual variables in influencing perceptions of social-sexual encounters.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of women entering the work force, in both traditional and non-traditional jobs (Flaim and Fullerton, 1978). With greater contact between the sexes in the work place, along with the advent of increased consciousness on the part of woman, certain areas of conflict have taken on added significance. One of these areas is sexual harassment at work. This can be attested to by the fact that it has received increasing attention from journalists (Farley, 1978), the federal government (Merit System Protection Board, 1981), the legal profession (MacKinnon, 1979), counselors, trainers and therapists (Fuller, 1979), managers (Collins & Blodgett, 1981), and social scientists (Benson and Thompson, in press; Gutek, Nakamura, Gahart, Handschumacher, & Russell, 1980). Many of the previous social science findings came from regional and national surveys. For example, from a survey conducted by Gutek et al. (1980) on working people in the Los Angeles area, it was found that the majority reported some kind of social-sexual encounter with the opposite sex ranging from complimentary sexual comments to sexual favors as a condition of work.

Although initially conceptualized rather narrowly by the press and the judicial system, the Office of Personnel Management (1980, p. 1) has recently defined sexual harassment as follows: "...deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures or physical contact of a sexual nature that is unwelcome." This definition makes sexual harassment a much more common and serious concern for employers and employees because it allows for a wide range of behaviors to have multiple and sometimes confusing meanings. What constitutes sexual harassment may often be in the eyes of the beholder or, at the very least, determined in part by the specific context in which the behavior occurs. Surveys (e.g., Marcus, 1980) have indeed shown this to be the case.

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of two contextual variables and their interaction, on people's perceptions of sexual harassment allegations: status of the initiator (which was also manipulated by Gutek, Morasch, & Cohen, in press), and age of the victim (which has not before been investigated exper-

imentally). Methodology was similar to that of Gutek et al. (in press), and, as in that study, the influence of sex of the perceiver was also examined.

The relative status between the initiator and the victim is a variable which has received a great deal of attention in the area of sexual harassment. Legal cases involving allegations of sexual harassment almost always involve a high status male initiator and low status female victim (Marcus, 1980). This accurately reflects the distribution of power in the work place since men are more likely to be supervisors over women (Gutek & Nakamura, 1982). However, broader definitions of sexual harassment have included situations in which the initiator may be of equal or lower status relative to the victim (Gutek & Nakamura, 1982). For example, a woman may be sexually harassed by a co-worker or lower status person when she is the recipient of repeated and unsolicited sexual attention.

A study by Gutek et al. (in press) investigating the role of status in interpreting sexual harassment found when incidents of sexual harassment contained an initiator with higher status than the victim, subjects perceived the relationship between the two individuals as less favorable and less appropriate. This effect was exacerbated if the incident involved touching while making comments on the victim's work. In addition, it was found that when the initiator has equal or lower status than the victim, the incident is perceived as more inappropriate if the initiator is male rather than female. These findings suggest that the meaning and appropriateness attached to social-sexual behavior in the workplace are strongly influenced by the status and implicit power of the initiator. For example, the fact that initiations by high status individuals (regardless of sex) are perceived as more inappropriate suggest that the power over and subtle threat to a victim's job are of major importance. Moreover, the fact that initiations by a female versus a male are seen as more appropriate when she is of equal or lower status relative to the victim implies that males regardless of their status vis a vis the victim, may simply be perceived to have more power than females. Additionally, many reports indi-

cate that supervisors are the most likely initiators (e.g., Benson & Thomson, in press; Farley, 1978; Gutek et al., 1980). Implied within the above findings is the notion that behaviors that are considered to be more inappropriate are also more likely to be perceived as sexual harassment. Based upon the above findings and assumptions, it was thought that, in general, the credibility of sexual harassment claims would be mediated by the status of the initiator with greater credibility being associated with a higher status initiator. (In the present study the initiator was always portrayed as male.)

A second factor that has been alluded to in the literature but has received very little empirical attention is age of the victim. In the present study, age of the victim was the variable of interest, while the age of the initiator was held constant. Previous writings on sexual harassment suggest that while a person (especially a woman) of any age may be a victim of sexual harassment, it is most often the case of an older man as the initiator and younger woman as victim (Gutek & Nakamura, 1982). This makes sense given the fact that men in supervisory positions tend to be older than their subordinates. For example studies by Gutek et al. (1980) suggest that women through their thirties are slightly more likely to report being a target of social-sexual behaviors in their current jobs than older women. In addition, it has been reported (Gutek & Nakamura, 1982) that people who label themselves as physically attractive are more likely to report that they were expected to date or engage in sexual activity as a condition of their jobs.

These findings suggest that a woman's age and physical appearance may be important mediators of the degree to which she is seen as a victim of sexual harassment. For example, it seems plausible that older women may experience sexual harassment to a smaller degree because they are not perceived to be as physically attractive and sexually stimulating as younger women. This is consistent with the findings that older women are often evaluated more negatively than older men or younger women (Novak, 1975; Novak, Karuza, & Namikas, 1976). To the extent that this is true, it was expected that the

credibility of a woman's allegations of sexual harassment would be mediated by her age, resulting in allegations of sexual harassment by older victims having less credibility than those made by younger women.

It was also expected that the credibility of an allegation of sexual harassment would be mediated by a Status of Initiator by Age of Victim interaction. It was thought that the claim would be more credible if the initiator was of high rather than equal status when the victim was young. However, if the victim was older than the initiator, or of the same age (middle aged), her allegations of harassment may be discounted because of her age and possible loss of attractiveness. Thus status of the initiator would be of less importance when the victim was middle aged or older.

The fourth hypothesis was based on previous findings regarding sex differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. The Gutek et al. (1980) survey revealed that men were less likely than women to see "dating as a condition of work" as sexual harassment and were less likely to view a variety of non-verbal social-sexual behaviors as harassment. Similar findings have been reported by Gutek (1981), Gutek and Nakamura (1981) and Collins and Blodgett (1981). Experimental findings by Gutek et al. (in press) have also demonstrated that men are less likely than women to label behaviors as sexual harassment. Given this, one would also expect that males would find the claim of harassment on the part of a female as less credible and less serious than would females. Men would also see sexual harassment as occurring less frequently. From the literature on physical attractiveness and Gutek and her colleagues' findings that men are more likely than women to report that attractiveness plays an important role in social encounters, one would expect that male compared to female respondents would find a woman's age (and attractiveness) as more important in evaluating the credibility of her allegations.

Specifically, the following hypotheses were tested:

1. Allegations of sexual harassment made against a high status initiator (supervisor) would be perceived as more credible than against an equal status initiator



(co-worker).

2. Allegations of sexual harassment made by older victims would have lower credibility than those made by younger victims.
3. Allegations of sexual harassment would have more credibility if the initiator had higher status and the victim was younger. However, status of the initiator would be of less importance when the victim was middle aged or older.
4. Allegations of sexual harassment would have more credibility for the female respondents compared to the male respondents. Male compared to female respondents would find a victim's age (and attractiveness) as more important in evaluating the credibility of her allegation. In addition males would view sexual harassment in general as less serious and less common than females.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects included 69 males and 54 females from three undergraduate institutions. A majority of the students (51 males and 44 females) were enrolled in business courses at a state university, while the rest of the students came from introductory psychology classes at a community college and at a private two-year college. For the entire sample, the average age was 24.93 years ( $SD = 6.45$ ). An initial analysis was done on the responses from the state university students, followed by analyses which added the responses of students from the other schools. None of the significant main effects or interactions were affected by the addition of subjects from the other schools, hence the final analysis included the subjects from all three institutions.

### Materials:

Two independent variables: status (supervisor or co-worker) and age of the victim (young-25, middle age-40, and old-55) were crossed to produce six versions of the same vignette. The age of the initiator was held constant at 40 years old for all condi-

tions. (Thus the victim could be 15 years younger, the same age, or 15 years older than the initiator.)

The vignette itself described a situation where a director of personnel relations at an office machine company had to make a decision whether to investigate allegations of sexual harassment made by a female employee. Besides including the victim's age and initiator's age and job status, three episodes of alleged sexual harassment were described: (1) The victim was asked for a date which she politely refused, however, the initiator winked at her and said "You could be nice, I can do a lot for you." (2) The initiator rubbed up against the victim face-to-face while they were passing each other in a narrow hallway. (3) The initiator tried to pressure the victim into working late and when she refused the initiator said "You know jobs are really hard to get these days." Piloting on a sample of students ( $N = 58$ ) similar to those who participated in the study revealed that they were fairly certain ( $\bar{X} = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ , on a scale from 1-very uncertain to 7-very certain) that the vignette (with the status of initiator and age of victim variables removed) depicted sexual harassment. To reduce demand characteristics, the vignette was included with two other case studies regarding "problems faced by businesses". The vignette was always placed either second or third and order effects were not found.

Following the reading of the vignettes, subjects responded to a series of 7-point Likert-type items which formed the dependent measures (higher scores indicated the more positive or affirmative position). Three items: Belief, Certainty, and Responsibility, assessed whether respondents believed that sexual harassment had occurred, how sure they were about it, and whether the victim was seen as responsible.

Also, a group of items (7-point Likert-type) assessed general attitudes towards sexual harassment (e.g., seriousness and prevalence) and the importance of age and physical attractiveness of the victim. A manipulation check on the initiator's status was made and perceptions of the victim's attractiveness were also assessed.

### Procedure:

During class time a male experimenter distributed what was called "a survey being taken by a research consulting group interested in finding out about people's perceptions of situations often confronting businesses". Students responded to the three case studies in class and were then debriefed. Data collection was completed within 2 weeks. About 5% of the surveys were discarded due to incomplete responses or failure to perceive the manipulations. These were not systematically related to the experimental conditions.

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Check and Perceptions of the Attractiveness of the Victim

A univariate analysis of variance (2 - status of initiator X 3 - age of victim X 2 - sex of subject) was conducted on the perceived status of the initiator. Results indicated that when the initiator was the supervisor ( $\bar{X} = 5.97$ ), he was rated as having more status than when he was the co-worker, ( $\bar{X} = 4.22$ ),  $F(1,111) = 87.21, p < .001$ . In addition, a significant age effect also occurred on this variable,  $F(2,111) = 3.62, p < .03$ . Duncan's multiple range test (alpha set at .05) indicated that the initiator was perceived to have had more status when the victim was young ( $\bar{X} = 5.20$ ) or middle aged ( $\bar{X} = 5.24$ ) than when she was old ( $\bar{X} = 4.68$ ). No difference was observed on the perceived status of the initiator when the victim was young compared to when she was middle aged.

A similar analysis was done on the perceived attractiveness of the victim. Results indicated that the victim was perceived to be more attractive when the initiator was her supervisor ( $\bar{X} = 4.71$ ) compared to her co-worker ( $\bar{X} = 4.16$ ),  $F(1,111) = 9.34, p < .003$ . An age effect was also observed on this variable,  $F(2,111) = 8.23, p < .005$ . In particular, Duncan's multiple range test indicated that the victim was perceived to be more attractive when she was young ( $\bar{X} = 4.85$ ) or middle aged ( $\bar{X} = 4.44$ ) than when she was old ( $\bar{X} = 3.92$ ). No significant difference was observed between the young and middle age victims on perceived attractiveness.

Major Hypotheses Related To The Credibility  
Of The Sexual Harassment Claim (Belief, Certainty, Responsibility)

Multivariate analyses of variance (2 = status of initiator X 3 = age of victim X 2 = sex of subject) were carried out on the responses to the three items related to the credibility of the incident: Belief, Certainty, and Responsibility.

Main Effect for Status

The results of the MANOVA indicated no support for hypothesis 1,  $F(3,109) = .50$ , ns. The status of the initiator did not, in general influence the subjects' perceptions of the credibility of the victim's harassment claims.

Main Effect for Age of Victim

The results of the MANOVA indicated that the second hypothesis related to age of the victim was supported in part [multivariate  $F(6,216) = 3.51, p < .0025$ ] on Belief (univariate  $F(2,111) = 10.55, p < .0001$ ) and on Certainty (univariate  $F(2,111) = 3.09, p < .05$ ). The results on Responsibility were in the predicted direction but not significant,  $F(2,111) = .37$ , ns. The harassment claim of the young victim ( $\bar{X} = 5.31$ ) was more likely to be believed when compared to the middle aged ( $\bar{X} = 5.04$ ) victim,  $F(1,111) = 5.03, p < .05$ , or older ( $\bar{X} = 4.27$ ) victim,  $F(1,111) = 22.53, p < .001$ . In addition, the middle aged compared to the older victim's claims were also more likely to have been believed,  $F(1,111) = 6.27, p < .05$ . Finally, there was a significant age effect on the Certainty variable,  $F(2,111) = 3.09, p < .05$ . Subjects were more certain sexual harassment had occurred when the victim was young ( $\bar{X} = 5.12$ ) rather than old ( $\bar{X} = 4.14$ ),  $F(1,111) = 6.94, p < .01$ . No other age comparisons yielded significant effects on this variable.

Age of Victim by Status of Initiator Interaction.

The Age of Victim by Status of Initiator interaction (hypothesis 3) was also found to be significant [multivariate  $F(6,216) = 2.46, p < .03$ ]. The univariate  $F$ 's for Belief, Certainty, and Responsibility were  $F(2,111) = 3.07, p < .05$ ,  $F(2,111) = 1.23$ , ns, and  $F(2,111) = 5.31, p < .006$ , respectively. A priori  $t$ -tests were conducted to test the specific

predictions concerning this interaction. As predicted<sup>1</sup>, when the victim was young, subjects were more likely to believe she had been sexually harassed when the initiator had high status ( $\bar{X} = 6.10$ ) compared to equal status ( $\bar{X} = 5.28$ ),  $t_{(111)} = 1.70$ ,  $p < .05$ . The subjects were also more certain that it would be considered sexual harassment when the initiator had high ( $\bar{X} = 5.62$ ) versus equal ( $\bar{X} = 4.71$ ) status,  $t_{(111)} = 1.68$ ,  $p < .05$ , and they saw the young victim as less responsible when the initiator had high ( $\bar{X} = 2.30$ ) rather than equal ( $\bar{X} = 3.62$ ) status,  $t_{(111)} = 2.40$ ,  $p < .01$ .

For the middle aged victim, status of the initiator did not influence subjects' responses on Belief, Certainty or Responsibility, as predicted. The respective means on Belief were 5.00 for high status versus 5.08 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 0.20$ , ns.<sup>2</sup> On Certainty the mean for high status was 4.80 versus 4.46 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 0.69$ , ns. Finally on Responsibility the mean for high status was 3.04 versus 3.08 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 0.17$ , ns.

Also as expected, when the victim was older, status of the initiator did not significantly influence subjects' perceptions on Belief, Certainty and Responsibility. The respective means on Belief were 3.83 for high status versus 4.68 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 1.91$ , ns. On Certainty the mean for high status was 4.00 versus 4.26 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 0.48$ , ns. For responsibility the mean for high status was 3.83 versus 2.79 for equal status,  $t_{(111)} = 1.79$ , ns.

#### Main Effect for Sex of Subject

Hypothesis four regarding sex differences was also supported, multivariate  $F(3,109) = 2.77$ ,  $p < .04$ . Univariate  $F$ 's indicated that females ( $\bar{X} = 5.35$ ) were more likely than males ( $\bar{X} = 4.80$ ) to believe that harassment had occurred,  $F(1,111) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .03$ . Females ( $\bar{X} = 5.00$ ) were more certain about it than males were ( $\bar{X} = 4.36$ ),  $F(1,111) = 4.58$ ,  $p < .03$ . Also, females were likely to see the victim as less responsible ( $\bar{X} = 2.70$ ) than

1. One-tailed t-tests.
2. Two-tailed t-tests were conducted on the middle aged and older victim conditions because no differences were predicted.

males were ( $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ),  $F(1,111) = 6.05$ ,  $p < .02$ .

The multivariate analysis on the questions dealing with sexual harassment in general, resulted in a significant main effect for sex,  $F(6,106) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .0008$ . As expected, univariate analyses indicated that the males ( $\bar{X} = 4.65$ ) thought a woman's physical attractiveness was more important in determining whether she would be sexually harassed than females ( $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ),  $F(1,111) = 3.78$ ,  $p < .05$ . Males ( $\bar{X} = 4.82$ ) also felt a woman's age was more important in determining whether harassment would occur than females did ( $\bar{X} = 4.02$ ),  $F(1,111) = 8.70$ ,  $p < .004$ . Finally, females ( $\bar{X} = 6.28$ ) compared to males ( $\bar{X} = 5.52$ ), thought a charge of sexual harassment was more serious,  $F(1,111) = 9.02$ ,  $p < .003$  and females ( $\bar{X} = 5.76$ ) felt that sexual harassment was generally more common than males did ( $\bar{X} = 5.09$ ),  $F(1,111) = 7.07$ ,  $p < .009$ .

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study were generally consistent with a small but developing body of empirical literature on sexual harassment. In general, previous literature has indicated that the context in which social-sexual encounters occur may be a powerful determinant of the extent to which these interactions will be interpreted as sexual harassment (Gutek et al., in press; Gutek & Nakamara, 1982; Marcus, 1980). The present study investigated the influence of two contextual variables (age of victim and job status of initiator) on interpretations of social-sexual encounters. Consistent with our hypotheses, it was found that a woman's age and job status vis a vis her employer (or co-worker) play important roles in affecting the degree to which her allegations are perceived as credible. Younger victims are more likely to be believed and less likely to be seen as responsible than older women (perhaps because of younger women's greater perceived sexual attractiveness). An attributional interpretation (Kelly, 1971) would indicate that perhaps older victims are held responsible for eliciting the sexual encounter since there seems to be no external cause for the incident, e.g., her physical

attractiveness.

The main effect for age was qualified by the Age of Victim by Status of Initiator interaction. As expected, young victims were particularly likely to be believed when the initiator was her supervisor rather than a co-worker, perhaps indicating that power differentials between individuals are an important factor in subject's perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment. This finding is consistent with the results of Gutek et al. (in press) which showed that initiations by high status individuals are perceived as more inappropriate. In line with our prediction, status of the initiator did not lead to differentiated responses to the middle-aged victim or older victim.

Perhaps the most consistent pattern of findings is the influence of sex of perceiver on interpreting social-sexual behaviors. Females were more likely to label the encounter as sexual harassment, to attribute less responsibility to the victim and to believe the initiator sexually harassed the victim. In addition, females were less likely to think that a woman's age and physical attractiveness were related to the incidence of sexual harassment and that sexual harassment is a more common and serious occurrence.

It is possible that since women are most likely the recipients of sexual harassment, they may see it as a greater problem than men do and they may have a tendency to over-attribute a variety of behaviors to the category of sexual harassment. Men on the other hand, may behave in the opposite fashion and perhaps resist labeling encounters as sexual harassment. Future research may well explore the types of cues that are most important for males versus females in making attributions for social-sexual behaviors.

It is interesting to note that while much of our focus has been on assessing the impact of contextual factors influencing the credibility of an allegation of sexual harassment, these results say as much and perhaps more about a male initiator and his power. Generally, higher status initiators are perceived as sexually attracted to and more likely to harass young attractive lower status females. Subjects don't appear to find plausible a higher status initiator's being sexually attracted to either a middle-aged

person like himself or an older woman. Clearly, subjects perceive the higher status male initiator as being attracted to someone who is young, sexually appealing and in a relatively powerless position vis a vis him. These findings corroborate much of the media and common sense notions about who is likely to harass whom and why. However, the present findings must be considered with some caution as these were college students who may not be representative of people who are employed in work settings where such social-sexual situations as described in the vignette take place.

Together, the findings of the present study provide some of the first experimental evidence of the impact of contextual variables on perceptions of sexual harassment cases. Because socio-sexual encounters are most likely to occur in a job situation where there are any number of factors that may affect perceptions of harassment, it is very important both theoretically and practically that researchers begin to examine what behaviors are likely to be labeled sexual harassment and under what conditions.



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